

The
Swan
Gondola

→ TIMOTHY SCHAFFERT ←



ONE WORLD

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For Rodney

→ A PROLOGUE ←

After the Fair

Autumn 1898

EMMALINE AND HESTER, known in the county as the Old Sisters Egan, took their coffee cowboy-style, the grounds fried-up in a pan to a bitter sludge, then stirred into china teacups of hot water. They had their afternoon “shot,” as they called it, at the kitchen table, sharing a slice of a wet and heavy rum cake that gave them each a dizzy spell. The sisters were sixty-eight and seventy-two.

The day had been as peaceful as any they’d ever known—so peaceful they’d only just commented on it (“So very, very quiet,” had said Emmaline in her delicate, dreamy voice, drawing the words out, strumming her fingers through the air back and forth, like across the strings of a harp. “Learn to love it,” said Hester, “because it’s the racket of your grave”). At the uttering of the word *grave*, the house fell dark.

The sunlight at the windows seemed blown out with a sudden breath, but with a rumble and a roar and a shatter of glass. The house creaked, its joints an orchestra of great strain. Emmaline’s set of china—long-since excavated from her abandoned bridal trousseau—dropped from its tall cabinet, plate by plate by plate, smashing in an even rhythm, chipping at Emmaline’s heart with each staccato burst.

For all the years they’d had the farm, having moved west from the

East nearly three decades before, the Old Sisters Egan had struggled to keep the outdoors out and the indoors in, to preserve a city elegance and order in their drafty country home. They always removed their muddy boots before stepping inside. On their floors—wood planks carved from old hemlock trees—they kept Persian rugs. Their living room, every evening, glowed a shade of jaundice from the oil lamps, and they strained their eyes to read in the dim light—Hester settling in with books on animal husbandry, Emmaline with the thin dime novels that arrived by batches monthly in the mail.

Now books tumbled from their shelves, balls of yarn fell from a basket to roll and unravel, a shadow box containing the wreath of a braid of a dead niece (gone too soon) fell from its nail in the wall, the domed glass of the frame shattering. The caged birds that sang through every minute of sunlight fell silent.

The Old Sisters Egan looked at each other to share in their shock—a drama toward which Emmaline had always been inclined, but never, ever had Hester—and they took each other's hands, gripping tight. *I'm unafraid*, Emmaline thought, pleased that she had at least this last sublime split second of Hester seeking ease.

Despite all this wreckage, and some chimney bricks that dropped into the hearth and choked the parlor with smoke and soot, the Old Sisters Egan realized, from the lack of movement beneath their feet, that the house wasn't being lifted from its moorings by an unlikely late-autumn tornado; something had fallen upon them.

Hester opened the front door and took a slow step back, confused, worried that the drapery before her that cloaked the outdoors was a plot, the entire house shrouded in an act of theft or invasion. She lifted the rifle from the umbrella stand and cradled it, softly scratching her cheek with the end of the barrel.

"Oh!" Emmaline said. "Hester, it's silk!" She reached out the door and stroked the silk with the backs of her fingers.

They put on the new black coats they'd bought for travel to the Fair last month, the sleeves and shoulders overpuffed in a manner they

The Swan Gondola

thought fashionable. The peaks of the poofy shoulders reached their ears, and braided piping lined the seams at their sides. The coats had felt so conspicuous they had ended up not wearing them to the Fair after all, and had never once worn them even off the farm. They stepped into the silk, lifting it, swimming out, hunkering down, nearly crawling to the other side. With the barrel of her rifle, Hester pushed the drape of the silk from her path. Once they had stepped away from the house, they looked up. They might've begun to worry over the damage that had been done had they not been so overwhelmed by the sight of this deflated balloon consuming their farmhouse. They walked, arm in arm, backward, to take it all in, leaning in toward each other, their heads lifted to the roof, to the sky.

They'd witnessed so much during their lives on the farm—one summer they'd murdered a herd of cattle, shooting them to spare them a painful death from blackleg; they'd lost crops to plagues of weevils and worms; they'd built raging fires in fruitless efforts to ward off a freeze. They'd left Maine to come to Nebraska together, lured by a promise of plentitude available to two unmarried women, but there'd been no mercy. The farm had given them little and had taken much of what they'd brought with them. But this fallen, ruined balloon—it seemed a generosity of spirit dropped upon them from heaven. Finally, at least, a worthless, senseless bit of wonder. Emmaline and Hester listened to the gentle rippling of the silk, sounding like wind on wheat fields.

“Escaped the circus?” Hester wondered. When Hester squinted she could nearly imagine the silk as the skin of a runaway elephant popped with a pin. At the end of the front lane was a stone bench no one ever sat upon, and they sat on it now, to watch the balloon do nothing. Surely, any minute now, they'd be overrun by people from town, the curiosity seekers who had caught sight of the balloon falling. But rarely did people look up at the sky; their eyes were always cast down—on that stubborn earth. In Nebraska, the sky's endlessness could be too unsettling.

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THE OLD SISTERS EGAN, in all the strangeness and clamor, didn't realize just then they'd seen this balloon before and that they knew well of its origins. It was a relic of the Civil War. At the Omaha World's Fair, war balloons had been tethered to the tops of a few buildings for display, balloons that had been used by both sides for spying and surveying, and this one, from the Confederacy, had been sewn from silk intended for dresses. Hester had read in a Fair guide that the balloon had been made of dress silk, and she'd pictured all the belles of the South carrying armloads of gowns to the war cause. She'd pictured the women looking as Emmaline had looked when she'd been young, before her heart got broke by a cad. She'd pictured rows of women with scissors picking at stitches, dismantling the dresses, then restitching the wrecked skirts and bodices, the monogrammed handkerchiefs and ruffled bloomers, into a vast, delicate patchwork quilt. But it had been a fanciful illusion—the balloon had simply been made of bolts of a yellow silk that would have otherwise been sewn into dresses, and when Hester lifted her eyes to the sky that day at the Fair, her hand at her forehead to shade the sun, she'd been disappointed by the balloon's lack of dainty detail.

"The pilot!" Emmaline now said with a start.

"Where?" Hester said.

"I don't know," she said, "but wouldn't there be one?"

The women leaped from the bench and walked to where the balloon's ropes led them, to the other side of the house. The brittle shards of dry grass crackled beneath their boots. They discovered the wicker basket upright on the ground, tipped just slightly, empty but for a bottle of perfume that had somehow kept from falling out: extract of sweet pea, stoppered with a cork, its neck knotted round with a rose-colored ribbon. As the Old Sisters Egan scanned the landscape, seeking survivors or victims, Emmaline took a moment to uncork the bottle and dab fingertips of scent to the inside of her wrist.

The Swan Gondola

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EMMALINE AND HESTER walked in opposite directions, searching. Before catching sight of the pilot, Emmaline discovered a slightly cracked mask of papier-mâché in the dirt. Crouching, she picked up the mask by the chin, with her finger and thumb. The mask hadn't much character—a simple pink face with puckered red lips and wide, curious, childlike eyes of blue. She held it up to see how things looked through the tiny pinholes, and she scanned the horizon. It was then she found the pilot.

He was alive, flat on his back on the ground not far off, his fists and his jaw clenched tight, his left leg at an awful bend. *Why doesn't he scream?* Emmaline wondered. *Why doesn't he beg us for help?* Maybe, she considered, he mistook the tall shoulders of their high-fashion coats for the dark wings of death angels. Maybe he suspected them of scavenging for souls.

Emmaline squatted next to the man as Hester pressed the barrel of her rifle to the man's left temple. Emmaline pushed Hester's gun away and she took the man's hand. She whispered a lie in his ear. "Your leg isn't broken," she said.

He snapped his fingers weakly and a card slipped out from up his sleeve: *B. "Ferret" Skerritt*, the card read, *Omaha, Neb.* And on the back: *This sleight of hand you just witnessed is only a hint of my wizardry.*

Emmaline removed her coat and lay it on the ground. The Old Sisters Egan dragged the pilot, his body between them, and put him atop the coat. They then strained to carry him in the sling of it, like on a stretcher, to the barn, where Hester kept an apothecary cabinet, veterinary implements, strips of muslin, tins of ether.

AS FERRET BLINKED AWAKE from the ether, he seemed not at all alarmed. He seemed less interested in the cast on his leg than the raggedy pajamas he wore. The Old Sisters Egan had stripped the scare-

crow in the vegetable garden, brushed off the striped pajamas' straw and nettles, and had dressed Ferret for the evening. Though Hester had a closet full of men's overalls she wore when working with the livestock and the fields, they would not have fit him. For where Hester was squat, Ferret was gangly. The scarecrow's pajamas had belonged to a tall farmhand who'd absconded with a few of Hester's pistols; but the man had been no real loss. He'd been too fussy for farmwork.

Ferret, groggy, wormed his finger through a hole in the lapel.

In the barn, Emmaline had gripped tight to Ferret's foot and ankle as Hester had set the bone, jolting the leg into place. As Emmaline now sat with Ferret in the music parlor, just off the living room, she could still feel that click of reconnection as if it had happened inside her, near her fast-beating heart.

Emmaline told him her name. He only nodded.

"B. 'Ferret' Skerritt," Emmaline read aloud from Ferret's card. Ferret lay on a leather fainting sofa, a slit up one leg of the pajamas' pants to accommodate the lumpy cast that Hester had fashioned with swathes of plaster-powdered muslin. "'This sleight of hand you just witnessed is only a hint of my wizardry.' What more wizardry is there, Mr. B. 'Ferret' Skerritt of Omaha, Nebraska?" She slipped the business card into the cuff of her shirtwaist to practice snapping it out as Ferret had. The card fluttered to the floor with each attempt.

"None," he mumbled. He leaned his head forward to investigate the other holes and snags in his pajamas. His hair fell forward to hide his eyes—his head was a mess of tangled curls the color of straw. "I don't know any good tricks. All my magic is fake."

"Oh dear," Emmaline said. "I'm afraid the ether has wrecked your spirits." She poured him a cup of tea with a girlish elegance—her pinkies lifted, her wrists bent—as if pantomiming a party with a toy tea set. She held the cup to his lips; he took a sip then pushed the cup away. "I hope we didn't give you too much of that ether," she said. "But it was best you napped through it all, you little broken sparrow. Hester—"

The Swan Gondola

that's my sister—she really knocked your skeleton around. I listened very carefully and did everything she told me, but such an effort is no job for a couple of old ladies. Nothing you would've wanted to be awake for."

"Maybe that's what I'll do next," he said. "I'll become an ether addict." He wiggled his fingers in the air, gesturing for Emmaline to give him another sip of tea. He took the cup from her to hold it before his face, letting the steam warm his cheeks.

"Oh, an addict!" she said, clapping. "That's actually where Hester got the ether from. From Mrs. Peck, in town. We live just a few miles from Bonneville. Do you know it? Just a little bigger than a village, really. Mrs. Peck stirs the ether into her milk and sugar every evening to lessen the agony of arthritis." Emmaline thrilled at having a new audience for her gossip.

"See, you could ruin me without my even knowing it," he said. "Stir it into my milk and keep me here." He pushed his hair from his face and tucked the long curls behind his ears. He looked around the parlor. "This pretty room will be my keep."

"I'm so worried!" Emmaline said with delight.

Ferret emptied his cup, and held it out for more. "Please," he said. If it hadn't been for the tuft of beard at his chin, he would've had a child's face. In contrast, his voice was grizzled, as if from years of weariness. After Emmaline poured him more tea, he merely looked into the cup. "I was in a balloon," he said. "Did I fall out of it?"

Emmaline sat on the piano bench and pondered the question. "Well, eventually," she said. "Somehow."

"Where's the balloon now?" he said. "Is it still up there?"

"Not quite," she said. "It's up there, but not *up, up* there. It's empty. Of air, I mean. Or gas, or whatnot. It fell on the house, Mr. Skerritt, can you believe that?" She went to the window to pull back the lace curtain, to show the silk of the balloon shutting out the dusk. "We're nowhere at all. There isn't another house for another mile. I think it's

wonderful. I think it's *fate*." She lowered her voice to a stage whisper, and she held the back of her hand to the side of her mouth. "But Hester is beside herself. She's furious at you. She put a gun to your head!" Emmaline returned to the piano bench and leaned forward to touch her hand on Ferret's cast. "But there's some divine reason you're here. Something tugged you from the sky."

"No, no, no," he said. "I won't believe in fate."

But there's only fate, Emmaline thought. She felt enraptured by this stranger, captivated and poised for transformation like the heroine in a novel. The letters on the pages of the novels she read each evening were always so tiny, she had to use a magnifying glass even just to skim. The words so enlarged made every sentence seem an exclamation.

"Where'd you come from, Mr. Skerritt? Where were you before?"

"Everyone calls me *Ferret*," he said. He pulled at a little thread on his pajama top where a button had been.

"Where, Ferret?"

"I'm a thief, Emmaline. I stole the balloon from the World's Fair."

"The World's Fair! We were there too. You must remember *that*," she said, gesturing proudly with her teacup toward a contraption along the wall. *That* had pedals for pumping air, and wooden hands on the ends of metal stems. She demonstrated. She pushed the cabinet up to the piano, put her feet on the pedals and pumped, and the wooden fingers, wired at the joints, played. The fingers tapped out a tune with an additional clickety-clack against the ivory. "You can change the song with a different cylinder. We ordered it from a cabinetmaker at the Fair, and a month later it arrived by train."

"I don't remember it," Ferret said. "I don't remember anything."

"I hope that's not true, Ferret," Emmaline said. She ran her fingers over the keys, striking aimless notes, in a way that seemed flirtatious to Hester, who now stood at the parlor door.

"Emmaline," Hester said, "let the man rest."

"I'll press your suit coat," Emmaline said. She left her cup atop the

The Swan Gondola

piano bench and collected his clothes. "I'll repair your trousers. We had to rip into them."

ONLY A FEW MINUTES LATER, at the kitchen table, Emmaline said, "I wonder what he's doing now."

Hester just shook her head and returned her gaze to a book about silk she'd bought many years before and had never read all the way through.

"Perhaps he'll never go," Emmaline said. "And then we'll have someone to keep us company when the other one dies."

"He seems cursed with some bad luck," Hester said. "I wouldn't plan on him living longer than either of us." Emmaline didn't hear Hester, though. In her mind she was already composing the will for which she had never before felt a need. She listed in her mind all the lovely things she owned that she wanted someone else to have.

FROM THE INSIDE POCKET of Ferret's suit coat, a postcard fell. Hester had gone on to bed, so Emmaline sat for a moment alone, with the correspondence in her hand. With Hester upstairs, Emmaline could allow herself to be tempted. The postcard was addressed to Mrs. Cecily Wakefield of Omaha. She touched it to her nose and smelled the extract of sweet pea.

Wakefield. She knew something of the name. There was a Wakefield who'd built the Fair. She wondered who this Cecily was, and then wondered if she wanted to know at all. Would knowing change everything?

Emmaline turned the card over, for only a glance, and she thought she spotted words as incriminating as *heart* and *love*. Ferret wrote in a small, cramped hand to fit all the words on the card. She took up her magnifying glass and read more.

October 31, 1898

To a doll-faced doll with a heart-shaped heart,

I wish this wasn't a love letter at all. I wish I was writing to tell you that I've forgotten everything about you, and that I'm never, ever thinking of you, not even for a minute. I want to tell you that it wouldn't even occur to me to sprinkle this paper with your favorite perfume because I remember nothing about that Extract of Sweet Pea, or how it smells like springtime (even in wintertime) at the nape of your neck.

I don't remember you on the bench of the swan gondola, your bare feet lifted from your slippers, a sea-green paper parasol spinning on your shoulder.

Your restless spirit shouldn't try to find me. Haunt somebody else. And when I'm a ghost too, my ghost won't go anywhere your ghost goes.

Yours,

Ferret

The reading glass shook in Emmaline's hand as she read the letter again. This distressed her, this twist. She'd got lost in the romance of the day's events, with a handsome fugitive recovering under her roof. If there was to be a love story, she'd hoped for it to be hers. *But I'm too old*, she thought as she studied the lines and freckles of her hands beneath the magnifying glass. *Or am I?*

You forget yourself, Hester always reminded her.

Emmaline decided not to despair. She would simply play a different character in this little amateur theatrical.

IN THE MORNING, Emmaline entered the music parlor, a tray in her hands. One side of the tray held a soft-boiled egg in a pewter eggcup, a few wrinkles of bacon, and a buttermilk biscuit with a dollop of

sorghum. Across the rest of the tray were the implements of letter writing: an ink pot and pen, and some sheets of stationery.

"The paper's a little yellowed," Emmaline said. "So you'll need to beg Mrs. Wakefield's forgiveness. We don't write a lot of letters here, because we don't normally have much news to report."

"How do you know about Cecily?"

"The postcard in your pocket," she said, pleased to know something secret. "My eye just happened to fall on the name."

"I don't care," he said. He grimaced and rubbed his temples hard with his fingertips. "I don't care if you read it. Read it if you want."

"I can't," she said. "I've been to town already. I posted it." Ferret started at the mention of the post, but he said nothing. "You'll need to write her to let her know you survived."

"*Did I survive?*" Ferret grumbled.

Hester entered then, with a tray of her own: a cut glass decanter of whiskey, a shot glass, and three cigarettes. "In case you're not up to eating yet," she said, setting the tray on the tea cart near the sofa. Ferret took up a cigarette and began to light it.

"I beg your pardon, Ferret," Emmaline said, with a smile and a flutter of her lashes. "Shouldn't you ask the ladies in the room if they object to you smoking?"

Ferret, the cigarette between his lips, the match lit, smiled back at Emmaline, and his face snaked into that of the devil at his most pretty and corrupting. More than a hint of mischief and trouble, and a speckling of lemon-colored freckles that seemed sudden on his cheeks, gave him the look of a boy a mother never could properly scold. With a flick of his neck, he tossed his hair out of his face, and he widened his eyes. He gently took the cigarette away from his lips, lips so puffy, so thick, they seemed swollen from a tussle. Or from a long night of kissing. "May I, Miss Emmaline?" he said.

"I insist," she said. She picked up the bowl of sorghum and a spoon, and sat in the chair to eat the sweet jelly straight, like pudding.

He took the smoke in his lungs like it was a breath of bottled air,

and it appeared as if he could feel the cigarette healing all the cracks of his bones, working down through him like vapor.

“You need to heal up fast,” Hester grumbled. “You have to fetch your balloon off my house.”

Ferret’s eyes were closed. He held each puff of smoke inside as long as he could without coughing. “It’s not my balloon,” he said.

“You should tell us what happened,” Emmaline said.

“There’s too much to tell,” he said, shaking his head. His face had returned to its grimace of pain.

“We’ve got nothing but time,” Hester said.

But Ferret said no more.